

## **Is it Possible to make a Good Death regardless of our Beliefs?**

**Iain Brown Sunday 28th July 2013**

Of course, we all know that, unless we successfully kill ourselves, we normally cannot choose the time and place of our death, although, as we all know too, moves are afoot just now to change that in some circumstances. But these topical changes are not my concern today. Rather my concern is our individual lonely experiences of death, for no one can go with us. Some deaths come slowly with plenty of time to prepare for them and others come instantly, or almost instantly and probably wholly unexpectedly. I would argue that, although we have little or no choice about how we cope with the sudden death phenomenon, although of course we can keep our wills in order and make funeral plans, nevertheless we might still have some latitude about how we approach the slower version of death, about how we approach the run up to our final hours and especially the final hours themselves until the point where we lose consciousness forever.

I was brought up in a family and church community that undoubtedly believed in Hell. I remember hugging my family knowing that I, alone, would be the only one in Hell while they all continued loving each other in Heaven. I don't know if any of you have experienced that terrible sadness and fear, even when listening to funeral services about the separation of the sheep from the goats? Later, I struggled free of the medieval religious world I lived in and could declare my disbelief. But, for a long time after that, I used to be afraid that as I sunk in increasing weakness toward death in a final illness, my old beliefs would return and claim me. Especially as I read into psychoanalysis about the unconscious, I would lose confidence in my new agnostic non-beliefs and I would think it was possible that, as I neared death, I would break down and ask for an evangelist to save me in terror from my sins. That would have been a bad death for me, a betrayal of that I believe is best in me. It was only much later that I thought that perhaps that might not be enough and perhaps I would need to confess to a Roman Catholic priest too just to be sure. Then I saw the absurdity of it.

So I would have no hesitation in arguing that beliefs, perhaps these ingrained childhood beliefs lurking in the unconscious that we feel quite bold about rejecting in the daylight, and perhaps a bit more shaky about in the dark at night, these beliefs certainly can have a role in whether or not we make a 'good' death – whatever we may individually mean by that.

So why do we not talk freely about death? Most of us sense, or we have experienced, that talking about death can be a kind of emotional minefield. Tread softly, tread very softly. One of the most important things about death, perhaps for most people THE most important, is that death is about the potential end of crucial relationships.

I used to train counselors around Scotland and a part of that was usually a session aimed to help them understand that giving up an addiction was also a bereavement recovery process. If a person has lost their family, lost their employment and lost their

health all for the sake of the addiction then how much more will the loss of that addiction be bereavement too? I used to review the bereavement recovery process and all the factors that can delay it and all the ways in which it could go wrong. But however carefully and sensitively I set it all out, I seldom took a group that did not contain at least one very upset person because my dispassionate review had touched off the memory of an important lost relationship that had never healed. People suddenly welled up or had to spend an hour or so with me being debriefed after the event. Even thinking alone about death and its inevitable consequences for people in loving and, yes, strangely, even in hating relationships, is an emotional minefield.

I believe that is one reason why we do not talk about it much and, if we do so, we talk cautiously among strangers and even within our most precious relationships. If less than half of co-habiting couples of the UK talk about sex together, as was recently reported, then I hesitate to think how many talk about death. Fortunately thanks to some of the most important gifts of modern psychological research there are now several ways of releasing these buried emotional bombs safely. So just one of the possible reasons we do not talk about death is that we do not know how to and we fear being rejected if we even try.

Perhaps just as importantly, death is also about the loss of one's self. Of course we all know that quite a few people want to lose themselves and want to get out - perhaps through various attempts at suicide. But most of us love life and we cannot do that without also having healthy love of the very selves we have to live with 24/7.

So, if we ever talk about death, who do we talk with? Given the research on talking about sex, it seems unlikely that even in what are generally supposed to be the closest and most intimate relationships we talk much, if at all, about death. Is that because it is even more an emotive subject within a valued relationship than with relative strangers, and so the emotional minefield is so much more scary? I do not know.

Even as recently as the early nineteen sixties before the great decline in church membership in Western Europe began, it seems possible that people talked about death with priests and ministers who were supposed to have some professional expertise about it and especially about life after it. Faithful laity in the Roman Catholic Church and often in the Church of England still see their priests as experts in death and suffering and those Evangelical preachers who claim to save souls are still seen by their followers as having special knowledge and powers. But ministers in the liberal Christian Churches mostly cannot, should not and generally, I hope do not make any claims to special expertise. The growing ranks of practicing psychologists, psychiatrists and psychotherapists are more concerned with improving the present life of their clients than with death, dying or any possible afterlife. Although their concerns may occasionally include addressing their clients' dominating fears and guilts surrounding the inevitability of death, they seldom write about it.

Experience has made me increasingly suspicious of professional people who might want to force talk of death on me, people who want to save my soul, people who want to break into my mind and put it right. As a child I was often asked if I was saved. It seemed to be a supremely desirable state. I remember clearly, that like the wee boy

who confessed to his priest that he had committed adultery to gain some attention, I went around at about five years old announcing to my parents and relatives who were totally absorbed in decorating, that I was saved. Sadly no one paid any attention. At least once when I understood that I needed to confess my childish sins to reach this superior state I probably confessed them. My father used to describe this kind of soul-saving, as practiced by Evangelical Christians as 'soul-burglary'. Sadly, in the world of therapists I have witnessed the tearing open of the grief of a woman in group therapy in a way which was a disgrace to the profession. Equally 'soul-burglary'.

To return to my theme: Before I came around the Quakers, and later the Unitarians, I used to imagine that they would be more likely, being seriously spiritual or even religious people, to talk about death. But I have never found it to be so. So here we are, you and I. Are we left, if we did want to talk about death, in dumb isolation?

I do not think so for two reasons which are very important to me. I think it is possible to begin exploring the area of death in a neutral and supportive setting without creeds or emotionally charged beliefs and I believe it can be done. And I think there are huge benefits to be gained in doing so, not least a greatly enhanced experience of the value of life and the joy of living.

So today I am going to give you an opportunity and an invitation to begin to examine and perhaps even talk about some of your own personal take on death and I will try to help by leading off by giving you some of my own personal views of it. To each of us death has some private meanings, yet there are some in which we all share.

Eighty years ago, in his famous study of the psychology of rumor, Gordon Allport showed that rumors flourish most strongly and abundantly in emotionally charged conditions of ignorance and uncertainty where they embody the wishes and fears of men and women. It would be hard to think, then, of a clearer situation of uncertainty where people have stronger feelings about it, than death, or a better breeding ground for rumor than the phenomena of death and the possibility of life thereafter. The beliefs in various forms of heaven and hell in our own tradition and in some others, beliefs in reincarnation illustrate this neatly. Other, stranger, more modern beliefs, such as in the various suicide cults also seem to resonate to common wishes and fears in their followers.

If death comes relatively suddenly and early, it leaves us with plans unfinished and completion impossible, probably giving rise to intense and impotent anger, giving way to helplessness. But, as we noted, for most people in peace time death comes relatively slowly and only after several warnings and possibly considerable deterioration. We cannot normally expect to face death as our usual complete and competent selves. There could be more than just physical deterioration. There could probably be intellectual and emotional regression. My self as I know me, and yourself as you know you, will, quite possibly, be lost before death and we may be reduced to the equivalent of children crying in the dark.

Especially as the integrity of our self is broken down, we may well experience irrational guilt. Even rage is not unknown. Even without socially induced and supported ideas of guilt from the teachings about Heaven and Hell of my childhood and some of yours,

there will always be the inadequacy and guilt of imperfection, the unworthiness of the unbridgeable gap between the real and the ideal, of botched love-relationships that might have been better. One of the most valuable lessons I think I learned in my attempts to train counselors was that ALL relationships are imperfect. There are always things that should have been or not said, actions that should have been done or not done. But many, perhaps even most people do not realize that and when they come to grieve they often need to understand this at a deep level and be released from their own thoughts and feelings of inadequacy.

Also there may be a longing for what we never had, regret for the unexploited opportunities, for the "life that might have been" but never was. At least one survey of old people found to some surprise that they were less troubled by the sexual relations they should not have had than by the opportunities they did not take up.

Then again, people may be around as we die but no one can go with us. The Victorians especially loved pictures of the grande dame or the gran monsieur lying on their death bed surrounded by generations of grateful and adoring offspring – their version of a good death. Stories of guides who meet us lead us into the next life as we die seem to fit our emotional needs so closely that they may merely obey the known laws of the psychology of rumor.

But then the passage through death for you or for me might turn out to be a benign and peaceful mercy, a calm and natural release from a tired and bored old body and mind that has fulfilled its part.

As we have noted, to a social and loving being the separation from loved ones is one of the most painful aspects of death. Is the separation likely to be permanent or not? There is obviously fertile ground here for wishful thinking, and so for rumor, here. By promoting ideas of Heaven and Hell, entry to which is dependent on conformity and submission to moral and legal codes or acceptance of beliefs, religious institutions can exercise powerful emotional sanctions over those they hold in thrall. As I told you I know, this can be a source of anguish to the child (or adult) who believes that their behavior or beliefs will inevitably separate them from their loved ones for an eternity. It is difficult to justify the causing of such intense anguish merely for the upholding of the social order and of doctrinal orthodoxy and it still makes me very angry to think of it. I prefer the stance of the great French theologian and agnostic Jaques Maritaine, who, when asked what he would say when the last trumpet blew and he found himself, to his astonishment and dismay, before the judgement seat after all, replied that he would say "I was wrong", and expect to be understood – even forgiven.

Another obvious and universal aspect of death is change. Of course we don't know whether there will even be any change at all. We may merely go on as we are but in another place and time, or there may be colossal change to the extent that there will be no consciousness at all. Of course we may begin again immediately, as in the Hindu and Buddhist belief systems, perhaps in another form and with some transfer of the consequences of our sins and merit points from this life over into the next. Or, given what we know of the recycling systems of this earth it seems most likely to me that we merely disintegrate as a separate system and our component parts rejoin the larger

biological and physical system around us to be parts of yet other small systems in the future. So we cease to be integrated beings. But the possibilities for change are infinite. Death exposes our attitudes to change, both as loss and as liberation.

The component of loss in this change is obvious and often obscures the component of liberation. There are a thousand losses, loss of loved ones, of security, of joys as we have known them and, perhaps above all, loss of the sense of self. So as we die we mourn ourselves - although many of us feel ambivalent about ourselves and some of the parting will be liberation. Others of us are as agnostic about the possibility of really knowing the self and "who we are" as we are about the possibility of knowing a deity or an "ultimate reality". So we know that even the selves that we love and mourn are as likely to be illusions too.

All change involves a mixture of loss and of liberation. Even the loss of our most loved ones always involves some element of liberation, however small. So what might death liberate us from? It might mean liberation from the daily or hourly tyranny of fear of pain and need for pleasure? It might mean liberation from any responsibility for decision making and the burden of moral choice? It might merely mean liberation from the sheer boredom of old age?

Inevitably our attitudes towards death and our beliefs about it are shaped by our culture as a whole and especially by the attitudes of those closest to us. It does not make the traditional teaching of my culture, or of any other culture right or wrong. So my own beliefs and yours are to some extent predictable and different from those of an Islamic, a Buddhist or an Australian Aborigine and all this anticipation is inescapably set in the context of the way our culture treats death today. Except for fatal accidents, deaths are hidden away in hospitals, or at least behind closed curtains. Compared to even a hundred years ago, they are no longer such an everyday experience and, as the well-researched experiences of widows make clear, and, as we noted earlier, death and bereavement are certainly not popular topics of conversation and are usually avoided almost as taboo subjects.

After their death, a powerful image of our loved ones often lives on inside us, only gently fading, if at all. And even if it is not consciously with us, it is still there to influence us. This near universal human experience might be, and is, seized upon as a kind of "life after death" for the lost loved one. So, for a time it may be, especially for those of us who have children or who make some impact on our community or wider culture and so have "spiritual children" whom we may influence, perhaps even over centuries. But dynasties die, nations die, cultures die and even civilisations die. Who today remembers the stone age man who did NOT draw the pictures on the caves? Who, today remembers the woman who wrote the cuneiform records of ancient Sumerian accounts? That immortality is a mere consolation prize compared with the marvellous or terrifying promise of our own Christian tradition.

But clearly we can no longer live in the comfortable "parochial" certainties of belief of the Europe of, say, the Middle Ages when there was always the Christian promise of life after death and reconciliation with the dead in another life. John Hick in "Towards a Theology of Death" in "God and the Universe of Faiths" (1973) writes:

..there would be an intolerable contradiction in affirming on the one hand that God knows, values and loves each of his human creatures as unique individuals, and evokes in them the desire to reach the highest potentialities of their nature in response to his claim on them, and yet on the other hand that he has ordained their extinction when they have only just begun to fulfil the divine purpose which has endowed them with these potentialities and aspirations."

Yet in contrast Bertrand Russell in "A Free Man's Worship" in "Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays" (1918) writes: "That Man is a product of causes which have no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins - all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."

"Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and on all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that enoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate for a moment his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power."

And then we have the possibility of the return to the winds and the waters of the beautiful poem of the Chilean Marxist:

Sometime, man or woman traveler,  
Afterward, when I am not alive  
Look here,  
Look for me here  
Between the stones and the ocean,  
In the night storming  
In the foam  
Look for me here.  
For here is where I shall come,  
Saying nothing,  
No voice, no mouth,  
Purity.  
Here I shall be again,

The movement of the water,  
Or its wild heart.  
Here I shall be, both lost and found  
Here I shall be forever  
Both stone and silence.

We are part of the global village now and, more than ever, the prospect of death must be the prospect of the great unknown. So, for anyone whose thinking is no longer railroaded by the teachings and culture of childhood and present conformity, death is once again the great unknown.

So, what then might be the essence of death today. I would venture to suggest that death is best seen as the gateway to unknown infinite possibilities, at the same time terrifying and marvelous. At the very point in time when the last possibilities and freedoms of this present world narrow away to nothing, not even another injection, not even a shift in bed, not even another glorious or painful memory recalled, so simultaneously at that moment the immediate possibilities of death and what may or may not come after it, open out before us in their infinity. As we leave life absolutely anything that we can imagine could happen beyond death and most likely much, much more than we are capable of imagining at all.

Perhaps, even more than infinite freedom of choice, we fear the freedom of infinite possibility. Faced with it, we can try to hold on to our parents and take refuge in the security of our own particular religious tradition. Or we can bolt for cover and join a small inward-looking group within which there is a well-defined consensus of strong convictions and "huddle together against the doubts". If we do this we trade conformity and narrowness of view for protection from anxiety. Maybe we all have to do a little of these because none of us are able to stand alone in that terror and that marvel of those last infinite possibilities. I don't know because, like you, I have not been there yet.

Perhaps the most important practical consequence of thinking about death is the perspective it gives us upon life. We are never more vividly aware of life than when we are most aware of death. Our culture's half denial of death may seriously reduce the very quality of our awareness of life. Ageing and the proximity of death may bring its own poignant heightening of the appreciation of life. The way in which we face, or do not face, death is linked with the way in which we face life. It has long been my aspiration to face life with as few preconceptions as possible, without "psychological blinkers" or crutches so that I am open to life's full marvellous and terrifying range, variety and intensity of experience - that is to the truth, as close as I can bear to get to it. This is not very different from the way I aim to approach death.

All this brings me finally to my own personal awareness of the values by which I try to live, and they are most probably yours too. We all have values that we live by, sometimes up-front, conscious, and maybe even over-elaborated to the point of false dramatisation, other times barely conscious and only emerging in a crisis when we hear ourselves saying things and are a little astonished to know who we are.

Most of us share the values of truth (follow the inner light, but you have to check it out

all the time in case it may be darkness); love (in the sense of the agape of St Paul; or of the steely courageous self-sacrificial love which I sometimes think I see in the mythical Christ figure; or of the active unconditional positive regard of Carl Rogers and the practice of my profession as a psychologist and counsellor) and justice (in the sense of a human order often fought for in defiance of and protected from the seeming impartial chaos of the natural world - and often of much of the human world too).

But death is potentially the negation of even these dearest values. What does it ultimately matter if I or you remain true to our values up to the end or not? Perhaps, at the end, all that matters will be the breaking down of the 'me' as I experience myself to be now, the breaking down in pain and fear and release. Perhaps I will be able to remain true to these values to the end. That, for me, would be a 'good death', perhaps an act or despair but also of loyalty.

Perhaps in the words of Luther, as we read earlier, we are indeed "creatures with whom God wills to speak, right into eternity and in an immortal manner." This is usually described as a Christian hope but hope is not a monopoly of Christianity any more than fear is the monopoly of Islam or wisdom a monopoly of Hinduism or Buddhism.

Personally I do not see much evidence of a benign purpose or power which will ensure that the "goodies" ultimately win in this life or the next. I even suspect the beliefs of ethical monotheism serve a very human purpose of promoting in those who embrace them the acceptance of suffering and of priestly authority under many a bad regime. On the contrary, I rebel against what, according to my, perhaps arrogant and ignorant little human values, I see as a morally indifferent or even bad "government of the universe". Bertrand Russell's phrase "proudly defiant of the irresistible forces which tolerate for a moment his knowledge and his condemnation" expresses some of my experience nobly. There times when, with all my puny little positive powers I rebel, even until I am crushed. With or without an ultimate power to back me, with or without a consensus of fellow believers, these values of truth, love and justice have shaped my life, sometimes against my will, and, far from abandoning them easily, I shall continue to promote them, even against the grain of life.

But we human beings do not live so much by despair, however magnificent Bertrand Russell's vision of a kind of Nordic twilight of the Gods is. However noble his courage and defiance in his despair, his vision not the only alternative to the so-called 'Christian' hope.

We live best by hope and it is my fragile hope that at least the strength of the habitual attitudes associated with the way I have lived out my dearest values will be on my side when the last days come and that I will have a fighting chance of finishing this life loyal to my best self, with some shreds of consistency and some sense of hope left.

So what I most want to remind you of today is that nobody, not even the Christians have a monopoly of hope. The unknown can be as much the focus of hope as of fear. But if we retain any integrity at all, I hope we shall remember in those last hours and those last minutes what I have so long thought to be true in the prime of my life - that the last possibilities beyond my own personal death and yours are certainly terrifying but they

are just as marvelous in their infinity.

So may we be granted the courage and the integrity and the grace,  
Each for our own last moments, and a hope, whatever that may be,  
That is not disappointed in the end. And in the interim, of the here and now  
May our unflinching awareness of our own death and of the deaths of others, deepen  
and intensify our appreciation of life as it is from borrowed moment to borrowed  
moment.